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Massive ills await next Soviet boss

By Cord Meyer

WASHINGTON — ONE CLEAR SIGNAL that Leonid Brezhnev's days may be numbered as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party is the widening spread of rumors about the succession coming from well-placed sources in Moscow.

After fruitlessly studying for years the impenetrable facade of the Kremlin for fissures in its power structure, both American and European experts are suddenly swamped with political gossip that indicates Brezhnev's potential successors have begun to jockey for position.

Typical is a report from a well-positioned French source that claims Yuri Andropov, the KGB chief, is conspiring with the Soviet military to block Brezhnev's preferred candidate, Konstantin Chernenko. Charges that Brezhnev is becoming increasingly senile are dramatized by stories that he is regularly consulting a woman hypnotist.

Recognizing that it has a poor track record in predicting Russian power struggles, the CIA is not attempting to pick the ultimate winner, but believes that one of Brezhnev's old cronies like Chernenko is likely to serve as a caretaker while the real fight for the long-term succession takes place between younger men.

If the identity of Brezhnev's eventual successor is in doubt, the problems he will face are not. In fact, bloated military expenditures, declining productivity and disastrous agricultural practices present whoever rules Russia with appalling difficulties and dilemmas.

Consider for example the basic difficulty of providing the Soviet population this year with an adequate food supply. Although Moscow has attempted to keep secret the figures for 1981 grain production, they are beginning to leak out in public statements by lower-ranking officials. U.S. experts now agree that last year's Russian grain output was about 80 million tons below the target.

Since the Soviets can 45 million tons of grain per year because of their limited port and transportation capacity, this year imported grain, which is mostly fed to livestock, will inevitably be more than 30 million tons short. The Soviet farmers will have to try to keep their herds alive on starvation rations.

As a result, the Russian consumer faces longer queues for less meat, and other staples like potatoes are in very short supply. Even for the long-suffering Russian people, there is a point where hungry food lines can lead to riots, and there have already been work stoppages.

Although bad luck with the weather has magnified its consequences, the basic deficiency of Soviet agriculture remains the absence of incentives on the collective farms. The solution is staring Brezhnev's successor in the face. Private plots occupy 1.5 percent of Soviet farmland but produce 30 percent of the meat, milk and eggs and 60 percent of the potatoes. But if a new ruler of Russia tries to greatly expand the private plots, he will be condemned by party ideologues and opposed by the secret police who fear the political threat of a self-sufficient farming class.

Similarly, it is fear of losing party control over any significant segment of society that has led Brezhnev to strangle the growth of an independent labor movement and to prevent the decentralization of economic planning.

The external dilemma that Brezhnev bequeaths to his heir is the rising cost of empire. In strictly monetary terms, the CIA now estimates at about \$25 billion the net annual cost to the Kremlin of maintaining its surrogates in power in Eastern Europe, Cuba and Vietnam, not to mention the high political cost of Polish and Afghan repression.

By selling oil and gold at declining prices, the Soviets have managed, so far, to pay this bill. But if Western Europe can be persuaded not to bail out the Soviet economy with subsidized credit, the time is coming when the Soviet leaders will have to either cut their foreign commitments and military spending or face the risk of an internal explosion.

Presented with these hard choices, there's always the danger that Brezhnev's heir will react as the Argentine dictators have and seek in new foreign conquests a nationalistic diversion from domestic trouble. The economic and political vulnerabilities of the Soviet system are real but so is its military strength. We forget this at our peril.